

## **University of Canberra Graduation Address**

### ***Meredith Edwards***

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Members of Council, Faculty members, new graduates, your family & friends: good morning.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today, the Ngunnawal people. I respect their continuing culture - the oldest in the world - and the contribution they make to our life. I pay my respects to their elders, past, present & emerging and to any Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people here today. It is a privilege to say that in Professor Tom Calma AO, we have the first Aboriginal Chancellor at an Australian University.

I started work at this University as a tutor in 1971 when it was called the Canberra College of Advanced Education. In 1972 I applied for a job as lecturer in Managerial Economics - a subject compulsory for accounting students. I was heavily pregnant when I was interviewed by the College Principal, Sam Richardson, and that was actually the day my baby was due to be born. They must have been desperate to fill the position. Dr Richardson was petrified he might have to deliver the baby on the floor of his room, so he put the medical staff on standby. He also was a bit sexist, but paternalistic - he offered me the job, initially with a reduced workload.

That was over 45 years ago. It was the start of my long association with what is now the University of Canberra. Since then, I have been involved with UC in many roles: as senior lecturer, a member of the University Council, deputy Vice Chancellor and founding director of the National Institute for Governance. I am very proud to have been associated with UC for so long. Now I am fortunate to work alongside some internationally renowned experts at UC's Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis. A main focus of my work and that of many of my colleagues is on how to gain a more inclusive culture within organisations and in society. We work through Virginia Haussegger's 50/50 by 2030 Foundation to gain more women in leadership positions, but also work with government and other organisations on how to dismantle barriers to the employment progress of any people, who, for whatever reason, do not feel part of the dominant culture.

What I particularly like about our University is its diversity in terms of students and staff and the value it places on an inclusive culture. I applaud its aim to be the national sector leader in equity, diversity, inclusion and access.

Given that your current or future workplace is likely to be increasingly cosmopolitan, your experience of the UC culture should stand you in good stead. If you have engaged with people with different backgrounds to your own while at UC, rather than just studied in the same class, you will have learnt the value of differing perspectives on issues. Differences can lead to conflict and initially be harder to negotiate than engaging with people of similar backgrounds, but embracing differences can be beneficial to your learning, as well as rewarding in terms of the quality of relationships you form.

Currently around 95 per cent of Australian chief executives from the top 200 companies have a European background and around three quarters of them are anglo-celtic. Most are male. None are indigenous. We can and must do better in Australian organisations if we are to be successful both in economic and social terms.

I was asked to talk today about my experiences and perspectives that might be of some relevance to our graduates. My theme, like many previous graduation speeches, is the importance of 'relationships'; of the qualities that will always set us apart from machines and artificial intelligence. As one past speaker, Justice John Faulks commented, our monopoly on knowledge may be passing to machines but certain skills will always be our monopoly: emotional intelligence being a critical one. And machines can't cry. Not yet anyway. They can't feel. There lies our comparative advantage.

Management skills are by no means just technical; they are also very much social and interpersonal. Daniel Goleman's book on 'Emotional Intelligence' showed that, what set successful people apart from others was their interpersonal strategies: they put time into cultivating good relationships and reliable networks. They understood their own strengths and weaknesses and understood the needs of others.

To enhance your emotional intelligence requires self-awareness, a preparedness to understand how others feel and perceive you. It requires use of your heart as well as your head.

What Goleman said may convince you of the importance of the role of emotional intelligence in your life:

‘Much evidence testifies that people who are emotionally adept – who know and manage their feelings well, and who read and deal effectively with other people’s feelings – are at an advantage in any domain of life, whether romance and intimate relationships or picking up the unspoken rules that govern success in organisational politics’

Easy to say but hard to do. It means merging your expertise with engaging others. It means building up and maintaining trusting relationships in your workplace and with people working elsewhere. It means collaborating as much as competing in the business world.

Too often people adopt a persona on a job, masking their feelings. Who you are at work is often different from who you are at home. This was certainly how I behaved for a long time, no doubt influenced by often being the only woman in a team of economists or policy analysts. I learnt after many years how misleading and unproductive that can be. I once went to a training course for newly appointed senior executives in the public service where our colleagues in the class gave the perceived characteristics of each other. I thought that I would be seen as warm, approachable as well as thoughtful. But no, the feedback I received was that I was reserved, intimidating as well as thoughtful. I learnt a lot from that.

One of my reflections is, as far as possible, to be yourself and be authentic, and if you need to have a mask, then be aware of how it appears to others.

A related reflection is how important it is in work relationships to assess and respect people’s strengths and weaknesses – those ‘above you’ like your boss, those who you manage, and your peers. I served several Ministers while I was in the Australian Public Service. One in particular, a former Prime Minister, was hard to brief because, unlike me, he thought in pictures with less emphasis on the linear, analytical material a policy analyst might put on a page. But others preferred facts and figures if not graphs. Similarly, in appointing people, I

learnt, over time, how important it was that I appointed people around me who could absorb and analyse detail, as that was not a strength of mine.

Power often goes to people's heads as they rise in an organisation. Their empathy for others can get dumbed down and over time switch off. Beware of that possibility. A good test is a check on how well you are contributing to an inclusive culture in your workplace.

Thank you, Chancellor for the award the University has given me today. It is truly a great honour to receive it and certainly unexpected. And to students graduating today, warm congratulations on your achievements. I wish you all an enjoyable and rewarding new chapter in your life.